"Battle of the Ironclads, Merrimac and Monitor in Hampton Roads, March 8-9, 1862 as witnessed from the gundeck of the Merrimac".

I was a member of the United Artillery, Thomas Kevill, Captain. It was a Norfolk Company, in charge of Old Fort Norfolk on the Elizabeth River a short distance below the city; and I remained with the Company from April 19, 1861, to the close of the war. Early in 1862, as our company had been pretty well drilled in the use of heavy guns some expressed a desire to go on the Marrimac when completed, Capt. Kevill sharing in this sentiment. So, a detachment of thirty volunteers was formed to be in the Captain's charge and application was made to the proper authority for a temporary transfer for a fighting trip on the old "Invincible". In the meantime work on the ironclad went on, it was nearing completion; and at last news came to our boys that she was a float! Nothing as yet had been heard from our application and there was a feeling of disappointment; but we did not have to wait long. On Thursday March 6, 1862 a naval officer from the Marrimac called at our company headquarters and soon the company was called into line. The naval officer (Hunter Davison) stood in front and announced that he had come for some volunteers to to on the Merrimac, at the same time requesting them to step forward. He told them substantially that he presumed by their conduct that they expected to fight; and that it would be only a short time before they were in action; that it was a mere venture in naval warfare, and if any hesitated to fall back. Two declined to go (possibly) sick, two more men taking their places. It was now about 10 o'clock in the evening,

C 1796

and the officer said he would return to his ship immediately, and that boats would be sent for us, telling Captain Kevill to hold the men in readiness; and telling us not be take blankets or extra clothing as our services would be needed but a short time. By and by four long boats were seen up the river, the sailors pulling towards us with a good stroke! and upon their arrival at our wharf, we got in the boat after many good-byes to the boys we left behing, and were soon along side the Merrimac, and went aboard. The berth-deck was crowded and we passed the night as best we could with little sleep. Friday morning after breakfast we were assigned to stations at the guns. Our gun was furnished entirely with men from our detachment of which Captain Kevill took charge: My station was at a forward port-gun a Quick Dahlgren- together with more of our company. All day Friday, it was drill, drill, drill until every man seemed to know his duty perfectly.

On Saturday, March 8, 1862, at about 11 o'clock the Ironclad got under way and started down the Elizabeth. The men were standing at their guns, a bright sun overhead; all quiet save an occasional order and the throbbing of the machinery below; passing between the two cities, we beheld what seemed to be the entire population, and from wharves, balconies, windows and even housetops, ten thousand waving handkerchief's told us that in their hearts they were bidding us "Godspeed".

We passed Craney Island and entered the Roads. So far the men knew the locality, but none except Captain Buchanan and per haps one or two more, knew her destination or plans. Slowly the Merrimac moved on the wooden gunboats Raleigh & Beaufort

following behind. After a while the Merrimac turned toward the mouth of James River, going on, on, on. We knew that two of the enemies frigates were anchored at the mouth of the river near Newport News, and that the battle would soon be on, and that we were to contend with a formidable foe, with many terrible guns, but we welcomed the clash. The strictest discipline was in force on our gundeck, no one at the guns was allowed to talk not to whisper, orders only, and to obey. Everything was ready, guns loaded and run out for action. Boom! went the big bow-gun, and the struggle was on! nearer and nearer we approached the Cumberland, whose heavy guns poured an almost constant rain of shot and shell at us; while the Congress hurled its broadsides. When but a short distance from the Cumberland, word was passed along our gundeck for the men to stand fast, "We are going to run into her", and in a minute or so, crash! went into her starboard side the iron prow of the Merrimac! and the Cumberland's fate was sealed. Backing off immediately the Congress now received attention, but she seeing the fate of her sister ship, ran up the white flag, as is well known surrender was made and the ship set on fire. The Merrimac then passed the enemies batteries at Newport News and silenced them; and blew up a steamer at the wharf and disabled another. Our guns which had been in constant action throughout the evening as the enemy came in range in the ever changing movements of our Ironclad were quiet for a while; when we appeared to be returning towards home. Two of our guns were badly disabled by enemy shot striking their muzzles; but continued to be used at short range. Passing within a quarter

of a mile of the Congress which had been set on fire as stated. It was observed that it was not burning, so an incendiary shell soon fired it again, burning till it blew up. It was now about sunset and as we moved across the Roads it was growing darker and darker; and we afterwards understood it was the purpose to anchor at Sewells' Point. However we had a lively time before we anchored for the night; for several enemy war vessels returned and, supposing I presume, that under cover of the darkness they could concentrate such a rain of shot on the Merrimac as would disable her. Vain hope. As the darkness came on the shells began to explode about us, lighting up the expanse of water; both solid shot and shell frequently striking the armored side, to glance high up in the air. Whole shot had passed through the big smoke stack and it was perforated with many fragments. Passing through the storm in safety the Merrimac anchored at Sewell's Point after darkness had long set in. We had been standing at our guns since 11 o'clock and you will agree that we deserved supper. All night a sharp lookout was keps up for the approach of the enemy; and though fatigued, the night was passed with little sleep.

Sunday morning the sun rose bright, the air was crisp and soon after breakfast the Merrimac "was under way" again. The wooden fleet which had been increased the evening before with three of our war vessels were lying well apart. The Minnesota was seen to be aground between Hampton and Newport News, and it was determined to destroy her. The pilots could

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

http://archive.org/details/battleofironclad00drak

not put our vessel close to her as the water was too shallow. (The Merrimac drew 22 feet). So the guns began to pound her at about a mile off. No one knew that the Monitor was lying by her, having arrived the night before by all accounts. The Minnesota had been hit by several shots when the Monitor came from behind her and started toward the Merrimac, and at the same time notice was given to the gunners to look out for an ironclad was bearing down on us. It was but a few minutes before our after guns were heard to fire and a reply came from the Monitor, both vessels of course were in constant motion, but the Monitor was shorter, lighter draft and quicker in maneuver. Her object seemed to be to fire all her shots at one place on our side possibly thinking to crush us with her two 11 inch guns. The Monitor would go off and come around us coming to closer quarters and fire her guns, the turret being immediately turned away so we had a bad target for our guns. The action continued for over two hours; mostly at close quarters, sometimes not over forty yards apart, our guns firing as the turrets came in range, and once the Merrimac attempted to ram but struck the Monitor obliquely, and as the iron prow was lost in the Cumberland it was well enough, for it might have added to the leak.

The Monitor leaving the scene of action retired in the direction of Old Point, and showing no sign of returning. Lieut. Catesby, who was in command, (having succeeded Captain Buchanan when that officer was wounded) thought proper to return to Gasport; and upon arriving there our detachment was discharged with thanks. Luckily none had been killed and only four wounded; and of the

whole crew only two were killed and about fifteen wounded in the two days fight, a wonderful escape.

Captain Kevill and men were sent down to Fort Norfolk where our comrades extended to us a hearty greeting and were ready to ask some less than a thousand questions. We were excused from duty for fourteen days, and my first thought was to visit my home town Jackson, N. C., not to boast, but feeling an inch taller and that I had a little to my credit.

Now this roughly written narrative exceeding my promise to be brief is respectfully submitted.

W. F. Drake,
N. C. Soldiers Home.

Mary Beverly Henderson.